

On interdisciplinarity and *non-disciplinary* research: a conversation

Barbara Pizzo in conversation with Raquel Rolnik

Aim of this special issue of *Tracce Urbane* is to critically explore the issue of interdisciplinarity for Planning and Urban Studies. To practice forms of interdisciplinarity is a fundamental goal of the research group which launched this journal, and the journal itself was born to cross and overcome disciplinary boundaries, thus the necessity arises to explicitly discuss this issue.

Our aim is to reflect on the relation among different disciplines (their approaches, points of view, perspectives and methodologies) and their mutual contribution in tackling urban phenomena. At the same time, we are convinced that interdisciplinarity cannot be reduced to the sum of different knowledge or to the juxtapositions of different approaches. Interdisciplinarity has meaning and implications that are (1) theoretical (epistemological and methodological) and (2) practical (related to how the academic system works). The two dimensions influence each other.

Thus, the topics that we would like to discuss can be introduced through the following two sets of questions.

1a. Our researches are dedicated to complex topics, such as the relationship between financialization and housing, which mobilize different theories and require a combination of competences.

The object of our research, cities and territories, are complex systems *par excellence*: which is your idea about how to face complex urban problems? How do you think we could actually combine and share each one's viewpoint and approach, in order to better unravel the world we are living and working in?

1b. We discussed a lot among us for understanding why a deeper reflection on interdisciplinarity is so much needed and even urgent for us, and we highlighted some main reasons, and one that can seem just, let say, secondary.

The first and most important ones are related to, let say, our position in and towards the world: e.g. the idea that the

knowledge that is constructed together can be thicker and also more socially important than our own pre-constituted knowledge; and the idea that we always miss something, that we need 'the other' in all the possible manifestations, the more different, the best. To some extent, we could say that a key feature of our interpretation of interdisciplinarity is to acknowledge our own limits and limitations.

We did not want to sustain the need to go back to a sort of pre- (or anti-) modern science; and we refuse the idea of having a sort of unitary vision that risks to erase or to homogenise differences, which are quite important indeed. Moreover, we think that the knowledge and competence that each one has is important, and they should not be undervalued, ignored or mystified, so the problem of how to actually practice interdisciplinarity arise. How do we practice interdisciplinarity in our research activities?

1c. Let's go for a well-known example: the concept of space, or that of scale.

Those two are key concepts for a number of disciplines, and it often happens that each discipline uses them differently. Sometimes this leads to miss the chance to understanding each other: if, in a research group there is a human geographer, an anthropologist and a planner, the case is not so rare.

Which is your view about this rather common problem?

2a. The 'secondary' reason is that, since we strongly believe in what we expressed before, we cannot but criticize the extreme disciplinary specialization that is, in our view, a main problem of our academic system.

You are in the board of one of the most important urban studies journal (IJURR): did it happens to you to discuss about how to consider disciplinary fields or, e.g. to feel embarrassed for not knowing exactly under which discipline a certain contribution should be categorized, or attributed to?

Did it happen to you to discuss about if and how the different disciplines, which constitute the broad field of urban studies are bounded or reciprocally differentiated?

2b. In the Italian academic system we are increasingly submitted to evaluation processes. What is happening is that interdisciplinary approaches are highly recommended in words, but if you have a

profile that is not fully and clearly disciplinarily defined, you can be in trouble.

Something similar happened also to our journal: we recently tried to have it 'recognized' as a scientific journal, and we discovered that we have to get the recognition from each of the represented disciplines. This really caught our attention and stimulates our reflection on how interdisciplinarity is actually conceptualized and considered in practice (as a sum of disciplines).

Did you ever need to legitimize a heterodox, hybrid research approach, for your academic career or for publishing in a journal? Which is the policy of IJURR?

RR: I would say that most of the questions that you are raising are almost related to one big question, which is how much urban studies can be encapsulated into one discipline, and of course the answer will be no, not at all. It is a very interesting point because what happens when you encapsulate urban studies and urban issues into one discipline? You produce a very fragmented way of trying to understand, and especially in this time... Maybe in XVIII Century or early XIX Century somehow it was possible because by that time we did not use to live all those different scales in our bodies at the same time, which we are living now, with globalization and trans-nationalization, not only of economies but also of ideas, of people moving around, of financial circuits, and all of that is so much present at the level of everyday life, than it is just impossible to understand and to create a picture of what is going on in the urban realm and what is going on with ourselves without simultaneously seeing things in different scales.

And one of the big issues of the different disciplines is exactly the scale I mobilize to see phenomena. Anthropologists, for instance, they tend to read situations at a very close scale – while in urban planning at a bigger scale, which does not permit to see the phenomenon very closely, but provide the context, the big picture. If you talk about political economy, then you tend to see things at a very macro scale, so they are completely different scales, and it is just impossible to understand what is going on without combining those different scales. And the fact that each discipline looks at it in a very different way and separate way prevents us to compare, but also, and this is also related to that, prevent us to intervene in the phenomenon. Because we are talking about urban studies, and especially for critical

urban studies their main concern is not only to explain or to show the empirical data in order to demonstrate what is going on, but critical urban studies intention is also to provide tools, instruments, and means for those who are intervening and acting on the urban as political actors, to change things. That is why it is so important for critical urban studies to understand, and nowadays it is absolutely impossible to understand what is going on in different cities if you do not combine at the same time different views from different disciplines, which implies, in my view and as I said, different scales that are very unique for each discipline.

BP: You touched a fundamental issue, that of scale. In my view, the issue of scale is so much important also because it implies and keeps together substantive and methodological problems. But I think we need to make a step back, in order to clarify why interdisciplinarity is so broadly and increasingly considered important but so poorly practiced, in the sense that looking at how it is actually translated into practices, very often it came out very simplified and, let's say, banal. So, in what do the main difficulties of implementation of such approach consist? In my experience, it seems that even if you are working with people which are used to do interdisciplinary research together, each one often tends to use its own approach, so that it seems that interdisciplinarity can be reached through kind of juxtapositions of different viewpoints and approaches. If we go back to the idea we expressed before, of interdisciplinarity as the necessary approach of combining different scales, what we need is *to* consider those different scales in their matching or mis-matching, to try to understand what happens at their intersection, not just *to consider* the different scales as separate.

So, in my view, we need to overcome this idea of interdisciplinarity as 'juxtaposition' of different viewpoints and approaches, and to find a way in which interdisciplinarity should be a new way of looking at things together, a sort of multiple, collective perspective. I know that this could be misinterpreted, as a claim to go back to some sort of unitary vision, which is not what I mean. On the contrary, using a concept that I investigated years ago, I would say a 'landscape'. Did you ever think about interdisciplinarity in this way? Or did you ever experience what I mentioned in your research?

RR: Yes, I think that my trajectory as researcher has been marked by an interdisciplinary view. And I can tell you that a lot of times I am criticized for not sticking very clearly to a particular academic field, because scholarship is organized into academic fields. You remarked in your presentation that the whole organization of what we can call the social and territorial distribution of work in the academy is organized in disciplines. Those are the new corporations, not corporations in terms of entrepreneurship, in terms of business, but I am talking about corporations in the old sense of *corporazioni* of the different tasks, in order to protect them but also in order to feed them – the more and more now that we have those indexes that through algorithms can place you in the universe of academic scholarship: and those are organized with the academic journals of the field, the number of quotations that you have in that particular field. So, all is organized in those fields as separate fields. So, people who are practicing interdisciplinary work they have troubles - and I have passed through that - in order to place themselves in one specific field, which is how most of academic fields including that of urban studies are organized.

But what I see is that more and more people are crossing across [the boundaries of those fields].

IJURR, the journal I am part of the editorial board is an example of interdisciplinary journal, because it absolutely cannot be labeled as a journal of geography, or urbanism, or sociology, or anthropology, or cultural studies, or any other specific field: it receives pieces from very different academic backgrounds, different fields, but also interdisciplinary pieces. But I know that this is very unusual, this is not the rule in our scholarship and in our research.

Also because, for instance, something that is always expected by academic journals is that you engage with the existing literature of the field. So, in order to do an interdisciplinary reading of any thing, the least of literature that you should engage with would be enormous, impossible to deal with. So, that is one of the real obstacles that we have, and it is a serious obstacle because disciplinary studies basically feed the machinery of the different corporations of the different disciplines and they are not really able to cross across and to create imaginative concepts that, in my view, come out only when you really cross across. But then, again, you have this problem that we have too many studies

produced in each different field, too many studies available, so it is getting more and more difficult, instead of easier to actually do interdisciplinary work.

BP: Can you make an example of a case in which you have been asked to comment or review an interdisciplinary paper, and you did not know exactly how to deal with it? Did it ever happen to you something of the like?

RR: Yes, it happened to me not as a reviewer but more as editor of a special issue or a special dossier, and arguing with my colleagues that maybe we could simply drop out the idea that each paper must start with engaging with the existing literature because precisely when you have a paper that is really crossing across different disciplines it would be very difficult to engage with the literature of all the disciplines at the same time.

BP: So, you mean the kind of engagement with the existing literature that is expected when you are working within a more bounded disciplinary field, which has to do with the idea of 'advancement'.

I think that what we are increasingly experiencing is that it seems that there is only one way (one way of structuring a paper, one way of presenting an argument, one way of engaging with the existing literatures). But maybe we could have different ways of using the existing literature, maybe what we need is just to try to remember that (maybe) there are more than just one way of doing things – maybe it should be referred to with methodological pluralism (e.g. as defined e.g. by Bell and Newby in 1977)?

RR: Exactly, then we have here maybe a lot of challenges but also a danger. Yes, I agree that it is important to read what has been written, using more or less the same theoretical framework that you are using, in order to check how much new are the propositions that you are doing. Of course, I do not criticize the need of relating or engaging with the literature. But the problem is the way it is organized nowadays: and, again, the literature is so vast, even within one single discipline, that to do interdisciplinary work become an enormous task, almost impossible to achieve. Then what I do (because I see my work as interdisciplinary, and I think that it happened throughout all my life as a researcher),

sometimes what I do is go back to the classics, and just the classics, meaning the most important pieces and not everything that has been written or all the meaningful things that has been written about it. Of course, I have always the sensation that I am missing something, that something is absent, because probably somebody has written something very interesting and very related to what I am writing and reading, but since it is impossible to know and to read everything ... What I am saying is that it is not only a methodological question, it is also a question related directly with the business of academic scholarship and how the whole business is organized today as corporations' system with its own ratings and metrics and all that. I think that this is as relevant as the methodological question that arises when you mix disciplines and mix methods and scales coming from different disciplines.

BP: What about interdisciplinary working groups? Let me make an example. *Tracce Urbane* journal derives from an interdisciplinary research group that was born much before the journal. This research group is composed by people with different backgrounds, and coming from different disciplines. We started thinking about a more satisfactory interdisciplinary approach through deconstructing our own singular point of view and approach and putting the issue together in a brand-new way, trying to work really together – fully reconsidering a certain topic or problem together, instead of just contributing with our own specific competence to understanding a problem. What do you think that? Did it happen to you to work in a similar way?

RR: Of course, when I was listening to you, I was thinking to our own research group that we have at the LABCidade – at the University of San Paolo, at the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning. One of the characteristics of our Lab, where we do a lot of research on housing and urban issues, is the fact that we always have researchers from different disciplines, we always have PhD candidates and also undergraduates and post-docs from, at least, Law, Geography, Sociology, Political Science, Architecture, Urbanism, sometimes Anthropologists as well. The tradition of our group has been to work *together*, e.g. not to produce a legal chapter, then a geographical chapter, and so on, not at all, but trying to combine our knowledge. But also, in our case, trying to combine *knowledge that are not coming from disciplines at all*,

such as local knowledge, knowledge of everyday life, knowledge that are embedded in the actions and reflections of the subjects we are engaged with. This means to have an interdisciplinary but also *non-disciplinary* way of thinking and producing knowledge. I think there is one point that you are raising that has to do with the hegemony of the scientific thought on the planetary production of knowledge which has dislocated completely all forms of producing knowledge that are not conformed to the so-called scientific realm. So, we are talking also about an epistemological question, a question that is: why the only legitimate way of producing knowledge is the “scientific” one? Disciplines are deriving from this epistemology and we need to criticize that, because that produces a sort of “coloniality” in the thought. I speak about “Coloniality” not in terms of colonialism, of the historical colonialism that we had and have, but “coloniality” in the way that when we think about our realities, we always confront them with an ideal way of thinking and re-thinking place, space and time. So, I think that now we are living through a very interesting moment of criticizing that globally and this is coming especially from the so-called South, I would say from Latin America, from Africa, from Asian researchers engaging with local knowledge that has been always literally ignored and stigmatized as forms of knowledge because of the hegemony of scientific epistemologies. So, I think that the questions that you are raising are also related to that.

BP: Yes, and I really would like to deepen the idea of *non-disciplinary* research instead of interdisciplinarity, particularly from the viewpoint of a much in-depth critique to the production of knowledge.

RR: Exactly. Also because the risk is, if we say: well, now we have a new discipline, which is the interdisciplinary discipline, with its own scientific method, and if you do not stick with this and that, you cannot be legitimated and considered. I think that un-disciplinary is a better way to frame it and I think that we need it more and more, to open those cases and break those walls in order to really see things from different perspectives. This epistemology is born – and I am thinking about Wallerstein contribution: he talks about a world system. The world system of capitalism is not just capitalism, as an economic doctrine and

practice, is also science, is also racism, patriarchy, all of that is one combined system. Epistemologies are also a very important part of it. So, in order to really be able to think critically, we need also to break this line in the process of knowledge production as well.

BP: I think that in order to practice what we are saying, one must experiment a kind of un-satisfaction about what can be reached through the methods and the knowledge that one already knows, to understand that there is always something missing, and to me this feeling of incompleteness, which is related also to curiosity, can be at the core of a different approach. This is something that I mentioned earlier in this conversation, the importance of understanding our limitations, and that *we need the other* in order to understand reality and to intervene in it.

In order to be able to have an interdisciplinary approach or, after having talked with you, to overcome disciplinary approaches looking also for non-disciplinary knowledge, you need to acknowledge the incompleteness of your own knowledge and also of your own possibilities to understand things, you have to accept always that you need the point of view of the other.

RR: I completely agree with you. It is so clear that we are living in completely different times in every aspect of our lives. It has to do with the new phase of capitalism, it has to do with technological revolution, it has to do with global urbanization, it has to do with the realm of image and image making, it has to do with all the changes we are living and passing through. And it is always difficult to understand what is happening now, the present, it is always easier to think about the past, but the present is very difficult to grasp, but you feel it, you smell it, that something very new is coming. Of course, it has to do with the past, it has to do with everything that is not new, and in order to understand that, you must very clearly talk and think outside the box. For me is my everyday practice: I learn a lot when I talk with somebody from the field of astrophysics, and I learn a lot when I relate to artists, and I learn a lot when I talk with people who live in squatter buildings or land... I am just giving you examples of how much we learn when we are open to consider professors people that we never thought as our professors. Maybe for me in my own field is easier, in our school of Architecture and Urban Studies of the University

of San Paolo, it has always been a very interdisciplinary school, in terms of the presence of all range of different disciplines there, and a lot of exchange between them, but one of the crisis that we are living in the school today is that we are being demanded to be more “productive” in terms of citation in scientific journals – it is happening everywhere, and this is killing the *production of knowledge*. It is killing the production of knowledge in terms of taking out the energy of free thought and “thinking by doing” and all the types of knowledge production that still resisted and existed within our universities and schools.

BP: This is true and this is hard to say, if we believe that universities should be something completely different from what they are progressively turned into, you hardly accept that it can become a kind of machinery re-producing ready-made, ready-to-use knowledge.

RR: Yes, and I am shocked about how much we have been unable to reverse that. How much we have accepted that. We were converted into that, and I include myself, and it is horrible, it is like a vicious circle: if you do not enroll in the machinery, then you do not get the funds for research to start with, you do not get funds for scholarship for your students, so your students also are blocked, and then you are just isolated, without any source of funding for everybody to continuing doing the work, so it is very, very difficult. This is the way in which we are trapped, since this is a trap and we are trapped, and I think this a very meaningful battle, a very important battle to do, in my view, in order to reopen the possibility of thinking.

BP: Well, there are a couple of more issues that I would like to discuss with you. One is more, let’s say, “technical” to some extent, which is that we were wondering if IJURR has some kind of explicit policy regarding interdisciplinary approaches.

RR: As far as I know, the answer is no. Clearly the journal is open to a variety of disciplines and also to comparative studies.

BP: And so, to raise a practical point, how do you choose which is the best (or a good) reviewer for a certain paper, if the paper is very interdisciplinary?

RR: That's a nightmare! I always struggle with that. What basically I do, in order to avoid to chose within a specific discipline, what I try to do is first of all to find somebody who had worked with the same empirical object. I try to find, first of all, somebody who knows the subject. And it is not so important if he/she is in the same discipline or not. Is much important that he/she has done a lot of research on that, and can have fresh reading of the paper, based on the knowledge that they have. I think that it works in a way, in order to avoid too much disciplinary works that, I confess to you, to me is a little bit annoying, although I had to learn to do that myself, otherwise I would not be published.

BP: The very last question. A colleague and good friend of mine, a sociologist with whom I work since many years, taught me to ask always a last question, which is a metaphor for describing the issue we are talking about.

So, if you have to describe interdisciplinarity through a metaphor, which one would you use?

RR: I am going to use an architectural metaphor, I think. Because for me it is so clear when we are teaching architecture to our students. You take a certain number of square meters. I tell you, ok, you have a hundred square meters to create a space, and your limit is: a hundred of square meters. Then you have several possibilities of how to organize those one hundred square meters. If you take a very strict disciplinary approach, you take the hundred square meters and you build several walls in between the space, with several tiny rooms. Of course, you are going to have several rooms, and if you are designing a house, it will be a house with several rooms: a room to read, a room to sleep, a room to receive guests, and so on and so forth. But at the same time you know that you can design also a more open space, and in a more open space you can still accommodate your guests, your child, your place to study and read but, first, you can accommodate all that in a more flexible way and secondly in a much more pleasant way because it is completely different to live in a number of small rooms and to live in a large, huge room where you can also run and dance. So, I think that this is the metaphor: that you can have a big open space that you can navigate, or a very strict fragmented tiny spaces where you are encapsulated.

Raquel Rolnik is Professor at the Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade de São Paulo. Through her long-lasting work within the “Núcleo Espaço Público e Direito à Cidade” she contributed at establishing the ‘LabCidade’ in 2009 [labcidade.fau.usp.br]. See also her Blog – A Cidade é Nossa. She is member of the editorial board of IJUUR – International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. raquelrolnik@usp.br

Barbara Pizzo, PhD in Urban and Territorial Planning, teaches Urban Planning and Urban Policies at Sapienza University of Rome. barbara.pizzo@uniroma1.it